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Out of the Attic

The Civil War's beginnings in Alexandria

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Image: Fort Ellsworth, near Alexandria, Va., interior view, April 3, 1864. Photo by Andrew J. Russell, Library of Congress.

After the attack on Fort Sumter, S.C. in April 1861 the clouds of Civil War closed in, Alexandrians who had previously supported the Union clung to the hope that conflict could still be avoided. But after Lincoln's call for states, including Virginia, to provide 75,000 troops to quell the insurrection, the mood in the city changed quickly.

Recognizing that Virginia would be forced to take up arms against her Southern sisters and become the main highway of battle between the North and the South, Alexandrians voted overwhelmingly in favor of Virginia's secession on May 23, 1861. Any hopes that the Union would not contest the new Confederacy were dashed the following morning when Union troops entered the city by land and water, overwhelmed local militias and began the transformation of the genteel town into a military center for the war effort.

In the early hours of that morning, President Abraham Lincoln's former law clerk, campaign manager and close assistant, Col. Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth, marched up King Street with the New York Zouaves, a unit of men he had personally assembled from the New York City Fire Department. Just four blocks into the town, Ellsworth stopped at the Marshall House hostelry to retrieve a secessionist flag from the rooftop flagpole, but was shot dead by proprietor James W. Jackson while descending the stairs. By the end of the day, with the threat of violence now real, Union troops began to quickly commandeer buildings and private lands for military operations.

Just one day after the death of their beloved Colonel, Union soldiers assembled high above Alexandria atop Shuter's Hill and began to clear land for a strategic fortification to be called Fort Ellsworth, one of 68 forts eventually built around Washington, D.C. The fort was laid out by Capt. Horatio Gouverneur Wright, an 1841 engineering graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Wright had only one month earlier been released by Southern sympathizers when he took part in the destruction of the Gosport Navy Yard at Norfolk, Va. to prevent it falling into Confederate hands.

In Alexandria, Wright selected a site a few hundred yards to the west of the current George Washington Masonic National Memorial for the fort, which ultimately included a large garrison for twenty cannon. The fort had a commanding view over the city, the Potomac River and the endless open fields that stretched westward to the horizon between the Little River Turnpike and Leesburg Pike. As seen in the background of this view of the fort taken by Andrew Russell in 1864, the almost complete elimination





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of forested lands around Alexandria to improve visibility against surprise attack was accomplished by Union forces at lightning speed. In the early years of war, the Confederate flag and camp at Munson's Hill in Falls Church could clearly be seen in the distance.

After the Civil War ended, H.G. Wright supervised engineering projects for the U.S. Army and became Chief of Engineers in June 1879, when he was simultaneously promoted to the rank of brigadier general. He worked on highly complex projects such as the construction of one of America's most significant suspension bridges connecting the then separate cities of New York and Brooklyn, and the completion of the Washington Monument in the nation's capital, which began in 1848 but was halted for twenty-three years in 1854 due to a lack of funding. The structure was finally complete and dedicated in 1885.

Wright died in 1899 and his grave at Arlington National Cemetery now faces the 555' structure, the tallest monumental obelisk in the world.

"Out of the Attic" is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as "Marking Time" and explored Alexandria's history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into "Out of the Attic" and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by Amy Bertsch, former Public Information Officer, and Lance Mallamo, Director, on behalf of the Office of Historic Alexandria.